



K A N S A S

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Cholera Q&A

What is cholera?

Cholera is a disease caused by ingestion of the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae* through contaminated food or water. Although cholera was far more common in the 19th and early 20th century than it is today, outbreaks of the disease still occur. In the U.S., these outbreaks most often take place along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico, Louisiana, and Texas.

How is cholera spread?

Eating raw or undercooked shellfish, or spending time in or around brackish water has been found to increase one's risk for becoming exposed to cholera with outbreaks that have occurred in the U.S. It is possible for the bacterium to be spread through the stool or vomit of an infected person, but this is unlikely to happen if thorough hand washing and other proper hygiene practices are followed. Cholera can be spread from person to person, but it does not become airborne.

What are the symptoms of cholera?

People may show no symptoms and become carriers of the disease, or will begin to show symptoms between 1-3 days from the time they were exposed to the bacterium. The most notable symptom is frequent and persistent diarrhea, which is likely to be colorless, odorless, mucousy, and painless. Dehydration, low blood potassium levels, and abnormally low blood pH may develop in untreated patients due to the rapid loss of body fluids. In rare cases, the disease may result in kidney failure. Coma or seizures resulting from hypoglycemia and fluid loss are likely to occur in children.

Is cholera fatal?

Cholera is usually quite severe, but is normally not deadly in the U.S. Death can occur in up to 50 percent of untreated cases, but with appropriate antibiotic and fluid replacement therapy the death rate is less than 1 percent.

DIVISION OF HEALTH

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How can cholera be prevented?

Proper hand washing after using the restroom and before preparing or eating food should always be performed and is effective in controlling the spread of cholera and many other diseases. Similarly, foods should always be adequately cooked to kill cholera and many other types of foodborne disease organisms.

If contaminated water has been determined to be a source of a cholera outbreak, all foods and beverages associated with that water source should be considered contaminated and not be consumed, including ice and foods rinsed or prepared with the contaminated water. Alternately, contaminated water may be boiled vigorously for at least one minute or treated with chlorine or iodine if it must be consumed or otherwise used.

Does a treatment exist for cholera?

As with any other type of diarrhea, first aid can be started by the patient or a family member immediately. Because the risk of disability or death from cholera comes from dehydration, rehydration should be started immediately. In cases of mild or moderate cholera, rehydration orally or intravenously is often the only treatment required. Oral rehydration should be with non-contaminated fluid that contains adequate electrolytes, such as Pedialyte® or Gatorade®. Your family physician, other healthcare provider, or emergency department can order intravenous rehydration.

For patients with severe prostration or debility, antibiotics are indicated. Because of recent instances of cholera that is resistant to certain antibiotics, the judicious use of proper antibiotics is essential. Your physician or healthcare provider should provide such therapy.